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Aide Tells How He and North Armed the Contras

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WASHINGTON, May 18 — Robert W. Owen, a "foot soldier" in the secret operation to help the Nicaraguan rebels, detailed today how he and Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North used the State Department's humanitarian-aid program to supply weapons to the rebels.

Mr. Owen, a tall 33-year-old, also re-

counted numerous anecdotes, some of them humorous, showing how an avowed amateur fared in the world of covert operatives. In one case he described a tale of intrigue when he was sent from Washington with instructions "to go to a corner Chinese market" in New York.

Using a code name, he related, and acting on the orders from Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord, Mr. Owen picked up a wad of 95 100-dollar bills that the grocer had kept hidden under a pants leg. He then flew back to Washington and delivered the money, wrapped in a newspaper, to General Secord in a hotel.

Told to Reload Plane

On one occasion, Mr. Owen testified before the joint Congressional committees investigating the Iran-contra affair, Colonel North told him to reload a Government-chartered plane that had carried medical supplies from Washington to Central America with munitions. At the time, in March 1986, Mr. Owen was being paid by both the con-

tras and the State Department's Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office, which was established in 1985 to distribute only nonlethal supplies to the contras.

Mr. Owen insisted he was only a private citizen working on behalf of a cause he believed in deeply. For the contras, he said, "I was willing to risk my life, my fortunes and also the advancement of my career."

Mr. Owen's and Colonel North's action appeared to be in direct violation of the law banning United States military aid to the contras during 1986. The State Department had chartered the plane as part of a Congressionally ap-

proved program of \$27 million in humanitarian aid to the rebels during the fiscal year 1986.

The State Department declined to comment on Mr. Owen's testimony.

One State Department official said the humanitarian-aid office "ended up paying a good portion of the pre-positioning costs for aircraft and other equipment" that Colonel North and his operatives, including Mr. Owen, used to deliver military supplies to the contras. "The savings to them, the expense, was considerable," the official added.

A full day of testimony also included these other disclosures:

Colonel North often joked that he might go to jail if his actions were discovered, Mr. Owen said. Colonel North also repeatedly said "he was going to be the fall guy" if they were caught.

Colonel North himself cashed some of the traveler's checks intended to finance the contras, according to Senator Orrin G. Hatch, Republican of Utah. Senator Hatch, who has been a staunch defender of President Reagan and son of Colonel North in the hearings, said the committee had evidence that Colonel North used the traveler's checks to buy snow tires and an airplane ticket. He also cashed some of them at food stores and gas stations in the Washington area. The implication was that some of this was for Colonel

North's personal use, but that was not stated explicitly.

Senator Paul S. Trible Jr., Republican of Virginia, said there was evidence that General Secord and his associates might have earned a profit of as much as 300 percent on some items they supplied the contras, including hand grenades. General Secord insisted in weeklong testimony that he earned no profits.

President Reagan, in Chattanooga, Tenn., speaking to a group of graduating high-school seniors, was asked by a local reporter if he would resign if it was proved that he broke the law during the Iran-contra affair. Mr. Reagan replied: "I know absolutely that I did nothing illegal."

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At the start of today's hearings, Senator Warren B. Rudman, Republican of New Hampshire, disclosed that General Secord had still not turned over \$8 million in profits from the arms sales to the contras and Iran. It is still in Swiss bank accounts. Nor has the General signed a waiver that would empower the Senate committee to examine his bank records.

In his appearance before the committee, General Secord said he would consider signing the waiver and hoped to donate the \$8 million to a fund for the contras in the name of William J. Casey, the late Director of Central Intelligence. Today his lawyer said the general would probably open his bank records to investigators soon.

On the subject of Mr. Casey, Mr. Owen repeated a suggestion made last week by Robert C. McFarlane, President Reagan's former national security adviser, that Mr. Casey and Colonel North had a special relationship.

"Under the Wing of Casey"

"I believe he was under the wing of Director Casey," Mr. Owen said of Colonel North. On several occasions when he was in Colonel North's office in the White House, Mr. Owen testified, he overheard Colonel North talking on the phone with Mr. Casey or saw Mr. Casey walking in or out of the office.

Mr. Owen, who described himself in testimony last week as a "foot soldier" in the operation to help the contras, spoke of Colonel North with fervor. He concluded his two days of testimony by saying, "I love Ollie North like a brother," and reading a poem in praise of Colonel North and the contras.

It was Colonel North who arranged for him to get a job as a contract employee in 1985 with the State Department's humanitarian assistance program for the contras, Mr. Owen said. Robert W. Duemling, the State Department officer in charge, was suspicious of him, Mr. Owen acknowledged, because everybody knew "I was Ollie's man."

When he signed his contract with the State Department, it prohibited him from supplying to the contras any



Senator Daniel K. Inouye, foreground left, chairman of the Senate panel investigating the Iran-contra affair, pointing toward Representative Lee H. Hamilton, chairman of the House panel, at the start of the afternoon session of hearings yesterday. Senator Inouye, who arrived to the session wearing an eye shade, said, referring to Mr. Hamilton, "I'm getting him a pair tomorrow."

weapons "which can be used to inflict serious bodily harm or death."

But Mr. Owen said he did not hesitate when Colonel North ordered him to use a L-100 transport chartered by the State Department to carry medical

supplies to Central America and then reload it with munitions. The contras badly needed the weapons, and Colonel North — code-named in one memo "B.G." for "Blood and Guts" — thought the plane could expedite their

delivery, Mr. Owen said.

In the end the operation fell through when the weapons did not arrive, he testified, despite help from several officials of the Central Intelligence Agency.